

# “La mariconería de la barra”: Homoeroticism and Homophobia in Denevi's “Michel”

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Marco Denevi's short story, “Michel,” from the collection entitled, *Hierba del cielo* (1973), is in many ways an intriguing small-scale companion to his best known work, *Rosaura a las diez* (1955). Comparing the story and the novel, it becomes clear that the structures and themes seem to be crafted from the same raw materials. For example, the first person narrators in both works, limited by their ignorance of key pieces of information, describe their relationship with an enigmatic stranger whose identity is revealed at the very end of the narrative. At the heart of the two fictions lies a mystery which functions through the tension between knowledge and ignorance and through the disguising and disclosure of a person's true identity. And in both cases, the resolution of the mystery produces a tremendous irony.

But the comparison also brings to light a key difference between the two works. In “Michel,” the author openly explores an issue of identity that he cleverly disguised in the earlier *Rosaura*: that of same-sex desire. I have argued elsewhere that the more fascinating mystery in *Rosaura a las diez* does not revolve around the question “who is Rosaura?” but rather around that of “is Camilo Canegato a homosexual?” In “Michel,” conversely, the narrator reveals his same-sex desire from the very beginning of the story and the mystery to be resolved demands an

answer to the question, “who is the man desired by Michel and is *he* a homosexual?” Beyond the question of the identity of the stranger, the story “Michel” raises another problem requiring more careful inquiry, and that is, “what does Michel really desire?” In this study I will focus on Michel's homoeroticism, specifically his magnified desire for the “masculine,” and his equally intense rejection of the “feminine,” his homophobia, and how these feelings of attraction and repulsion precipitate the destructive consequences at the end of the narrative.

“Michel” is a story told in first person to an unnamed narratee. Michel, whose real name is Gonzalo Maritti, tells what happened to him some years earlier when, as a very attractive eighteen year old, he worked as a bartender at a place that was well-known in the neighborhood as a hang-out for homosexuals and hustlers.<sup>1</sup> One evening, a striking man in his forties enters the bar and becomes the object of everyone's gaze: his hair is blond, his skin is tanned and his physique is powerful and muscular. Besides his physical beauty, he is wearing the type of clothes that display wealth and prestige, and as a result of the combination of these elements, he appears to embody the traditional attributes of the successful, masculine man. Michel watches the man, studying him, as he attends to his every need from behind the bar. In turn, the man brushes off the advances from the “mariconería de la barra” and concentrates his attention exclusively on Michel. Late in the evening, Michel and the stranger finally begin to talk. After finding out some very specific information—that Michel's real name is Gonzalo, not Michel, that his mother has recently died, and that he lives alone in a boarding house—the man finally asks Michel what time he finishes his shift at work and tells him that he will wait for him outside

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<sup>1</sup> Although the author does not indicate a specific year in the text, the existence of a well-known gay bar in Buenos Aires most likely places the events of Michel's narration somewhere in the mid-1960s. Zelmar Acevedo, in his study on gay culture and history in Argentina, notes that “[c]on todo, y atendiendo sobre todo a lo que vendría después, merced a todas las garantías y libertades que efectivamente imperaron entre 1963 y 1966, la sexualidad alcanza un lugar y se manifiesta en la paulatina aparición de boites para homosexuales, así como la diversificación de sus lugares de reunión...” (232).

in his black Thunderbird. Once Michel joins him in the car, they continue to talk about Michel's past and the conversation turns to his job at the bar and why he had agreed to meet a customer after the bar closed. Because of the nature of the peculiar game-playing necessary to protect oneself from physical danger as well as from the possibility that the man might actually be an undercover officer of the vice squad, Michel must play the game of simultaneously concealing and revealing some very important information about himself and what he wants. He gives highly ambiguous answers to the stranger's questions about whether or not he knew that the bar was a gay hang-out and whether or not he had ever been "corrupted" by accepting dates from customers. The stranger, seemingly satisfied with Michel's answers, takes him home. There, the man tells Michel that he must reveal something to him. Michel, thinking that the man wants to tell him that he is gay, hugs him and kisses him passionately on the mouth. At this point, the man flies into a rage and begins to beat up Michel with his fists. Michel, in a fit of anger, kills the man and runs for the safety of the boarding house. The next day, Michel's landlady wakes him up because she is curious to know what ever happened with the wealthy blond stranger who came looking for Michel the night before. The stranger had shown her a letter written by Michel's mother when he inquired about the boy. But all the landlady knew was that Michel was named for him—the man's name was Gonzalo, too—, that he had a number of distinguished surnames and that he had a grand estate in the province of Córdoba. Michel realizes at that moment that he has murdered his own father.

Working as a barman at a place that everyone knows is a hang-out for homosexuals, there would be no scarcity of men with whom Michel could satisfy his sexual urges, were that the only thing that Michel wanted. In fact, because of Michel's exceptional good looks, he is frequently propositioned by customers: "A la madrugada yo estaba más pintón que nunca. Me ponía pálido

y se me marcaban unas ojeras que todo el mundo me decía que parecía James Dean. A esa hora más de una noche algún cliente, en curda, me preguntaba con lengua hecha un trapo: —Michel, Michel, ¿cuánto cobrás?” (138-139). But Michel, it appears, is looking for someone or something different than what he can find in the average *maricón* at the bar. When the handsome stranger walks in, Michel focuses all his attention on him and works very hard to insure that the man notices him, too. But why is this particular man so irresistible to Michel? What are the features that appeal to Michel's homoerotic desires? These qualities include not only physical beauty, the element most commonly associated with erotic attraction, the stranger's prestigious ethnicity, and his economic privilege, but above all, it is the stranger's powerful masculine gender appearance which arouses Michel's desire. In short, Michel is aroused by the man's *macho* appeal, displayed in his muscular physique (physical power), his northern European ancestry (ethnic power), and his wealth (economic power). The concentration of so much power in one man makes him utterly irresistible.

Michel's interest is first piqued when he notices the stranger's physical attractiveness: “Un tipo como de cuarenta años, con cuerpo de pato vica, rubio, la piel tostada. Parecido, para que te des una idea, a Buster Crabbe” (132). Later, as his desire becomes more intense, Michel changes his opinion by saying: “[l]e brillaban los ojos. ¡Qué ojos, mamita querida! Como si se hubiese mandado la falopa. Era más pintón que Buster Crabbe” (140). It is clear that on a physical and sexual level, Michel is drawn to the stranger in a way that he is never attracted to any of the other customers at the bar.

Another important feature of the attractiveness of the stranger, linked to Michel's fantasies of an authoritarian macho partner, is the stranger's apparent *European* ethnicity. And for the Argentines, there is no ethnicity more privileged and desirable than the English. Michel calls the stranger a “caballero inglés” (137) as well as a “señorito inglés” (138, 144), although the only indication that he might be English is the fact that he is blond. And a blond, tanned

stranger would certainly serve as a highly coveted "trophy" partner for Michel to show off to everyone. Indeed, part of the desirability of the stranger is his potential for providing Michel, by association, with the kind of class privilege and status recognition that Michel so fervently desires.

But perhaps even more central to the question of attraction than ethnicity is the amplified desirability of a man because of his class distinction as a member of the wealthy elite. Throughout the story, Michel reveals his keen awareness of class and sensitivity to what behaviors will be more appealing to men of a higher social rank. When Michel first sees the stranger in the bar, he notes that he is a "cliente con categoría" (133) and as such, Michel needs to treat him in a way that will arouse his desire but at the same time demonstrate that Michel "knows his place" as inferior and subservient. For example, Michel repeatedly makes note of his "technique" in attending to the stranger so that the man will immediately realize that Michel understands the difference between them: "yo me había dado cuenta de que era un cliente distinguido y que a un cliente distinguido no hay que hacerlo esperar" (134).

In Western capitalist cultures, economic and social privilege always lends males even greater power and appeal than is accorded men in economically disadvantaged positions. In Latin America, where economic development has been slow for multiple and complex reasons (principal among them, the crushing Iberian colonial system), sex frequently takes on the character of an economic transaction between persons of unequal social and financial situations. In the case of male-male sex, a young man from the underprivileged classes many times will

exchange sex for the material gain offered by an older and wealthier man.<sup>2</sup> In the case of “Michel,” the protagonist combines his sexual passion for the man and a desire to improve his dismal economic and social situation. For example, after describing the physical appeal of the stranger, he says that

[h]asta era capaz de hacérselo gratarola. Bueno, gratarola del todo no. Pero me conformaba con que me invitase a morfar o me regalase una corbata. Claro que para qué macanear: lo lindo hubiera sido que me nombrara guardaespaldas o secretario privado. De día todo normal. Y a la noche, me entendés. O que me adoptara como hijo. ¿Te imaginás? ¿Quién iba a avivarse? Y de paso tenía el viento asegurado. (132)

As the evening wears on, Michel's dreams of material gain become more specific: “...con esa cara [yo] tenía derecho a todo. [...] ...a que Buster Crabbe me comprara trajes, camisas, corbatas, me dejara manejarle el Thunderbird, y a lo mejor un día me llevara con él a Europa y allá en Europa, quién te dice, me levantaba a un punto todavía con más guita” (143).

Despite its apparent importance, it must be noted, however, that for Michel money is certainly not the most significant factor in his search for a companion. If that were true, he would surely have become involved with one of the many wealthy *maricones* that frequent the bar. Michel mentions, with a mocking tone, that although he may not have economic status, at least he is young, good-looking, and above all, masculine and that because of these qualities, he will be the one that the stranger in the bar is going to take home, and not those “mariquitas de la barra con sus Rolex y sus Peugeot en la puerta” (143). A man's desirability, for Michel, must be

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<sup>2</sup> The “hustler” (called “taxiboy” in Argentina, “miché” in Brazil, “chapero” in Spain, and “mayate” in Mexico) has become a common character in Latin American gay fiction. Isaac Chocrón's *Pájaro de mar por tierra* (Caracas: Ed. Tiempo Nuevo, 1972) and Luis Zapata's *Las aventuras, desventuras y sueños de Adonis García, el vampiro de la colonia Roma*, (México: Ed. Grijalbo, 1979) are two of the best examples. For an anthropological view of the situation, see Perlongher and Taylor.

the result of the correct combination of beauty, ethnic and financial prestige, and more than any other distinction, masculinity.

Michel focuses all of his interest and desire on a blatantly and overtly *masculine* male. Michel narrates how he desires the stranger at the bar who, with his calm air of self-control and his serious intensity exudes a strong sexual authority and power, as indicated by his ability to look directly in Michel's eyes: "Tenía voz de macho y una cara que vista de cerca era impresionante, te juro. [...] Y mientras tanto lo miraba en los ojos, un cacho de ojos verdes, viejo, que te daban chuchos de frío, y él también me miraba. Los dos serios, me entendés. Nada de sonrisitas" (133). The narrator is delineating a distinction, widely understood in Hispanic cultures, between the masculine confrontational directness of looking someone straight in the eye while holding his gaze, and the feminine attitude of deference that is displayed by averting one's eyes, accompanied by coy and coquettish smiles.

Michel's homoerotic desire is typical in Western culture insofar as it is directed precisely towards a man who appears to be the physical embodiment of all that is manly. Throughout the centuries, the Western heteropatriarchal system has cultivated this desire for all things male and masculine. As the poet Jamie Gough points out, "in a gendered society it is not only the physiological features of the woman or man that are desired, but also their social nature; not only their sex, but their gender. [...] ...we may assume that the sexual desire for men is desire for the masculine as well, perhaps, as the desire for the male body" (125-126).

But the category of "masculinity" is a problematic construct, particularly within a Latin American context. Lillian Manzor-Coats, analyzing the difficult issue of masculinity in societies that suffer from such a strong tradition of heterosexism and patriarchal domination as do Hispanic societies, concludes that in Hispanic culture it is impossible to separate masculinity from its extreme form, *machismo*:

Masculinity within the codes of machismo seems to be guided by a simulatory move: to be male equals being macho, *macho* meaning the excessive and extreme presence of masculinity or male dominance. Male dominance as machismo is translated as exaggerated aggression and stubbornness in male-to-male relations, and arrogance and sexual aggression in male-to-female relations. Maleness is thus culturally coded as hypermaleness; the difference between macho, the hypersimulation of maleness, and male disappears... (xix)

For most Latin American societies, especially those that have strong authoritarian and militaristic traditions, the general category of "the masculine" cannot be considered without its concomitant notion of *machismo*. The masculinity that Michel is attracted to is not only dynamic, unpredictable, and therefore sexually arousing, but also dangerous and frightening with its undercurrent of potential violence and explosive ferocity. Michel's sexual fantasies of an authoritarian macho lover are explicit: "Te juro que me palpitaba el corazón, de la emoción y al mismo tiempo del cagazo de que fuera no más un tira. O que fuese un tira y un entendido también me habría gustado. Un tira, un militar, un aviador, y que sin embargo me buscase a mí para la joda. Otro de mis sueños" (142). It is precisely this desire for a hyper-masculine lover who brings with him a potential for aggression that leads to the tragic ending of the story.

But for all Michel's insistence on certain conditions for his interest in a man, his fundamental homoerotic desires remain constant. However, towards the end of the story, when Michel and the stranger are talking in the car, Michel reveals a quite unexpected side to his desire—one that hints at a deeper human need than the mere satisfaction of sexual urges or the desire for financial comfort. When the man asks Michel whether he thinks it is strange that he accepted an invitation from a customer at the bar, Michel responds: "[m]uy, muy extraño, la verdad. Menos cuando uno está solo en el mundo y no tiene parientes, ni amigos, ni nadie. Lo único que uno conoce son nenes de mamá que lo tratan como si uno fuera un sirviente. Entonces no es tan extraño que uno se agarre al primer cable que le tiran. Pero a un cable de cariño, de afecto. A algo que lo haga sentirse una persona, no un mozo" (148). Although the money may



be important as a means of simple survival, what Michel really seems to be looking for is the passion and esteem (“cariño,” “afecto”) of other men—men who, because of their masculinity and wealth, inspire passion and esteem in Michel. The bastard son of an Italian immigrant [“mi vieja, que se llamaba Rosina Maritti y era tana” (131)] is seeking not only social and economic status, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the love and approval of men. But it is his desire to be loved by hyper-masculine, older men—paternal figures—that will place Michel in precisely the position he most despises about the “maricones de la barra”: the “passive,” “feminine” partner in a male-male sexual relationship.

In the context of Latin America, cultural conventions dictate a sharp distinction between the gender roles in all sexual relationships, whether they be same-sex or different-sex relations. Masculinity and its privileged prerogatives needs to be reserved as the exclusive domain of only one of the two persons, while the other must adopt a “feminine” attitude, no matter whether it is a woman or a man. This dichotomous relegation of gender roles into the masculine “active” position versus the feminine “passive” position, has been noted in study after study on Hispanic sexuality.<sup>3</sup> In Latin cultures, the pervasive notion exists that if so-called “normal” relations

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<sup>3</sup> Scholars such as Jorge Salessi and Roger N. Lancaster reject the binary opposition produced by the terms “passive” and “active” with its attendant implications of gender hierarchy and prestige, preferring instead “receivers” and “inserters” to describe the fluid sexual roles of gay men. Buchbinder and Milech note that they, too, prefer to avoid using the terms ‘active’ and ‘passive’ since, in their view, “this would impose male heterosexual categories upon a dynamic that is not heterosexual. We wish to note, however, that such categories are commonly imposed in the culture, in the distinction between ‘butch’ and ‘femme’ gays, which in turn implies a distinction between active inserter and passive insertee in anal intercourse” (84-85). Although it is important to reiterate that these categories are not the creations of gay men and lesbians, but are imposed by a heterosexist culture that insists on enforcing rigid sex and gender distinctions, the reader must recall that these distinctions are considered to be “real” in most Western cultures.

between people are heterosexual, involving a woman who desires a man, then, as Gough indicates “someone who desires men is like-a-woman” (126) and therefore, men who desire other men must, perforce, be feminine.<sup>4</sup> As a result, femininity as a constructed gender role becomes the default defining feature of the homosexual male. As Buchbinder and Milech state, “[e]ffeminacy in the male becomes, for the normative heterosexual culture, the sign of homosexuality itself, of deviance from the masculine, heterosexual norm, of ab-‘normality’” (71).

Manzor-Coats demonstrates that this is precisely the view taken in specifically Hispanic contexts, because the

category homosexual is not necessarily occupied by the one who is involved in same-sex erotic practices, but by the one who deviates from the gender constructs. In other words, in most societies in Latin America a man who engages in homosexual activity with other men is considered to be queer, *maricón*, only if and when he does not play his role as macho—that is, when he assumes the sexual and social role of the passive, the open, the weak; when he assumes the position and plays the role of woman. (xxi)

Lancaster concurs, noting that “the social definition of the person and his sexual stigma derive from culturally shared meanings of not just anal passivity and penile activity in particular but passivity and activity in general. ‘To give’ (*dar*) is to be masculine, ‘to receive’ (*recibir*, *aceptar*, *tomar*) is to be feminine” (114). In this connection, Brandes has shown that the most vulnerable and feminine area on a man is the anus because it can be penetrated by other men, as if it were a

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<sup>4</sup> The biologicistic theories of the so-called “invert,” and the “Third Sex” (a woman trapped inside a man's body) so popular and wide-spread throughout Latin America in the twentieth century serve only to reinforce and systematize this view of homosexuals as passive and feminine, and even internally female. The studies by the Argentine psychologist Francisco de Veyga, analyzed by both Bao and Salessi, demonstrate how well established the category of “invert” was in Argentina at the turn of this century.

vagina: "[t]he anus can be used in homosexual encounters, in which case the passive partner is perceived as playing the feminine role, and indeed of being converted symbolically into a woman" (232-233). It is not simply a question of sexual positions—who's on top, that is, who will penetrate and who will be penetrated during sex—<sup>5</sup> but more an issue of who wields power along with the force necessary to maintain it, of who may use others at will and who will become used by others, and not just during sex, but in any social situation.

Directly proportional to the attractiveness and desirability of a male's potency and forcefulness is the inferior stigma of the powerlessness and vulnerability of the female or feminized male. Consequently, the feminine element in exaggeratedly patriarchal societies is not only devalued, but even abhorred. As Villanueva-Collado indicates, "[e]n sociedades constituidas alrededor del privilegio masculino habrá de existir entonces una represión del elemento femenino tanto a nivel individual como a nivel colectivo" (24).

In the story "Michel," the "mariconería de la barra," the feminized and stigmatized men who have accepted the "passive" social and sexual role, represent everything that the protagonist finds despicable and repulsive: weakness, femininity, and dependency. For example, when the macho stranger enters the bar, Michel describes their reaction: "toda la mariconería de la barra hizo silencio, calculó cómo sería, y le clavó los carozos. Después meta codearse entre ellos y mover las plumas. O como decía Gastón: sacaron las polveras" (132). Michel combines two striking images: the image of a flock of carnivorous birds wanting to devour the stranger with their gaze along with the image of females primping and fussing with their powder puffs in order to attract the male of the species. These men, whose exaggerated feminine behavior disgusts Michel, are utterly worthless in his eyes. In comparing the *maricones* to the manly stranger, that

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<sup>5</sup> Lancaster notes, too, that because of the emphasis on anal penetration in male-male sex in Latin American countries (as contrasted with North America and Northern Europe where oral sex seems to be much more preferred), the positions of the masculinized "inserter" and the feminized "receiver" are very clearly unequal in terms of power and status.

is, comparing one macho male to several effeminate men, "...él era, para mí, más importante que todos aquellos mariconcitos juntos" (135).

The more intensely Michel longs for the macho stranger, the more powerful is the irony of Michel's social and sexual situation. Despite Michel's disdain and rejection of the "mariconería" and their femininity, Michel, through his passion for the stranger, succeeds in converting himself into the passive, feminine partner. Even more ironic is the fact that Michel unconsciously emphasizes and accentuates his own passivity by articulating his fervent desire to serve and obey other men. At first, his role as servant to the stranger's role as master is expressed in terms of his occupation as a barman: "Qué le sirvo yo. Yo a usted. Porque yo estoy aquí para eso, para servirlo a usted, y usted está aquí para pedirme. Usted pide y yo obedezco" (133). But later, Michel's yearning to serve mingles and intersects with his sexual desire: he states that he is "listo para satisfacerle cualquier deseo" (134). Michel not only accepts his position as the dutiful attendant, but looks forward to playing the subservient, feminized role in a erotic relationship with the stranger. And once Michel accepts his role as the feminine partner in the encounter with the stranger, he becomes what he loathes despite the fact that his *appearance* will not give him away, unlike the "queens" who blatantly announce their effeminacy with one look at them. Michel's homophobia, his "fear of sameness," is the terrifying thought that deep down he, too, is just like those *maricones* at the bar.

Further emphasizing the issue of gender-based power relations and Michel's feminine role is the circumstance that the man for whom Michel has so much erotic desire is not just any older man, but his very own unrecognized father, the ultimate symbolic source of male dominance in patriarchal cultures. The Freudian psychoanalytic implications of this attraction would suggest, in homophobic terms, that Michel's homosexual identification with the same-sex parent must be the result of the infamous "negative oedipal" path of desire. The author is implying that Michel, because of his upbringing by a single mother without a "valid male role-

model,” has self-identified with the female parent and has formed an erotic attachment for the absent male parent. In fact, Michel himself states quite explicitly that one way to camouflage a young man-older man sexual relationship is by pretending that they are father and son. But even more telling are Michel's thoughts while he is fantasizing about what it would be like to be with the stranger: “...quería decirle: Pero sí, mi amor, sí ya lo entendí todo y aquí estoy, soy para vos. Ser su guardaespaldas, pensé. *Ser su hijo adoptivo. Llamarlo papá* delante de todo el mundo y hasta hacerle alguna caricia y que nadie se avivara, y a la noche *ser su amante y seguir llamándolo papá*. Ese había sido siempre mi sueño” (141; emphasis added).

In exchange for physical love and affection as well as economic and financial security from the father-figure, Michel is willing and even hoping to give up his own autonomy (“soy para vos”) and retreat into an inferior and servile position. Michel's desire for the macho male requires that he relinquish his own status as an equal and surrender his own independence. The heteropatriarchy, through its unchallenged gender norms, has made it utterly impossible for Michel to conceive of a male-male relationship in any other terms. As a result, he is forced to accept the pre-established role as powerless, subservient, and “feminine” in a society that idolizes masculinity and despises femininity.

The effects of this desire for masculinity and disgust for femininity engender very strong unconscious responses in Michel. For example, throughout the entire story there is an acute undercurrent of fear and resentment, anger and violence. Faced with the possibility of becoming the companion of the macho stranger, Michel's emotions begin to soar. For example, he puts on a serious face so that no one will notice his interest in the stranger, and also because “cuando un punto de esos me levantaba, no sé por qué, me venía la neura. ....si vos en ese momento entrabas en *Le matelot* y me veías, creías que yo andaba con toda la mufa de Nemesio” (138). Without realizing it, Michel's anger and resentment are the product of his sense of intense shame at having to accept the role of the passive, feminized sex partner—becoming the thing thing that he

has been taught all of his life to despise, the *maricón*—in order to get what he wants and needs from the hyper-masculine man.

As time passes, Michel's anger and frustration become stronger as he tries to conceal what he is feeling for fear that he might ruin his chances of going home with the stranger. For instance, when Michel thinks that the man might be a cop, he puts on a sad face to disguise his true emotions, but what he is really feeling is “julepe y bronca” (139). And again later, when the man interrogates Michel in the car about the reputation of the bar and its clientele, Michel becomes enraged. Asked if this is the first time he has accepted an invitation from a stranger at the bar, Michel says:

Me cargaba el guacho, y en qué forma. Me dio una bronca bárbara.  
—Sí, señor. El primero. El primero aunque hiciese diez años.  
También él parecía cabrero:  
—¿Y a qué debo el honor de que conmigo hayas aceptado?  
Me puse agresivo:  
—Ya se lo dije. Porque sé distinguir a la gente. Y creí que también usted  
sabía distinguir. Pero si me equivoqué, disculpe.  
Pensé: aquí se cabrea en serio. Pero no, se rió. (147)

But just as Michel works to disguise his feelings, it becomes clear by the end of the story that so, too, is the handsome stranger. Blinded by his desire for the man along with his macho image and his money, Michel is fooled by the man's apparent non-aggressiveness. Michel frequently makes note of the serene demeanor of the stranger and finds that appealing and reassuring. For example, when one of the notorious *maricones* at the bar, Jorge alias Jorgelina, spills his drink on the stranger's sleeve in order to get his attention, Michel states twice that the man responded coolly and that “estaba serio, pero sin agresividad” (136). Later on Michel affirms that the stranger was not like other guys: “No como esos grasas que alguna vez caían de casualidad en *Le matelot* y cuando se avivaban ponían una cara que vos te dabas cuenta que

tenían ganas de repartir castañazos. No, mira, él los relojeaba como balconeando una cosa divertida" (137). Over and over in the story Michel mentions that the man is a cultivated gentleman and always appears perfectly calm and in control of his emotions. In other words, this man is safe, this man is not dangerous or threatening. But as they talk in the car, the man's intense questioning of Michel continues to strengthen the reader's sense that things could develop into something more violent. In response, Michel monitors the man's reactions to see where the limits of his anger lie. The interrogation ends when Michel decides to test the stranger's breaking point by threatening angrily to get out of the car and walking home. In other words, Michel is attempting to discover whether the stranger can be trusted or if he'll explode, in which case Michel can call the whole thing off with as little trouble as possible. When Michel pushes the man to take action, he thinks: "o me da una zalipa o me besa" (148). But the man does neither and when the two men arrive at the apartment, the stranger tells Michel "no tengas miedo" (148). But Michel does indeed need to fear. Still under the mistaken impression that the man is trying to seduce him even after his many tests and checks, Michel passionately kisses the stranger. At this moment, the man, who consistently displayed the utmost calm and stability, loses control of himself and savagely begins to beat Michel. The cool façade of the cultivated stranger crumbles as he unleashes a sudden homophobic fury that seems to have been merely lying below the surface during his questioning of Michel in the car. And in return, Michel, whose emotions are already at the boiling point, defends himself against the rage and violence and, unintentionally, kills his batterer.

In the dichotomy of desire for the authoritarian masculine and rejection of the subordinate feminine, it becomes plain that the conclusion of Denevi's text criticizes the traditional Latin American adoration of patriarchal and authoritarian power and prestige and serves as a warning that exaggerated desire for the masculine and repression of the feminine

leads inevitably to violence and destruction.<sup>6</sup> As Villanueva-Collado affirms, "[e]xiste un desplazamiento de la sexualidad genital en las sociedades totalitarias hacia la agresión física como forma de represión y a la vez de expresión de la sexualidad, desplazamiento que llega a equipar sexo y violencia física y mental dentro del sistema del falo" (32). In Denevi's story, homoeroticism, conceived as a hunger for the masculine, and homophobia, viewed conversely as a loathing for the feminine, work together to maintain a heteropatriarchal system of dominance and repression that, unfortunately for many Latin American societies, and perhaps especially so for the Argentine, has all too often been translated into neo-fascist military governments, complete with devastating state-sponsored terror. As long as heteropatriarchal societies continue to venerate the aggressive and brutal qualities of the *macho*, and abhor the "feminine" qualities of the "mariconería de la barra," every member of society will suffer the dire consequences of their collective homophobia.

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<sup>6</sup> Important here is the distinction that it is not the desire of one man for another man itself that is destructive, but rather an inflated value placed on masculinity and its power and forcefulness that leads to devastation.



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